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Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 41 (2010) 6706–6710

Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences

Selected Papers of Beijing Forum 2008

The Idea of Harmony and Its Musical Expression (with Musical Examples)

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One of the oldest cultural concepts in Chinese civilization is the musician-scholar sitting in his study, playing the *gu-qin*, and looking across the gnarled pine tree to the lake, the mountains and clouds. The scene is depicted in a treatise, the *T'ang-shih-hua-pu*, which was printed in the Ming-period. The woodcut adds also the details of an incense burner on the table and a plum-blossom in a vase to indicate early Spring.

Of course, pictures are silent and a story about music is not the music itself. But we as readers or onlookers understand the message: In a peaceful and otherwise silent nature the only sounds are coming from the plucked strings of the gu-qin; they form themselves into a tune. Then, beyond the physical, auditive experience there is also the meta-physical one, because the music means something: through it the player communicates with nature, water, mountains, air. What he establishes through music is harmony-harmony in the music itself, harmony between the movements of his fingers and his creative soul, harmony between himself as an individual and the natural world outside. His purpose is to gain both a peaceful balance among the forces in himself and peace and understanding of himself and the greater outside.

1st Musical Example: *Meihua san nong* (3 variations on the plum blossom) for *qin*, played by Li Xiangting. CD: *Chine: L'art du qin*. CD: Ocora C 560001

doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.05.016

In East—and Southeast-Asia the use of music as a witness of harmony and as a tool to reach harmony is a very common phenomenon; and it does not only serve as a private medium but also in a larger group: The gamelan music of Java and Bali is played by a group of up to two dozen players. Some pieces are in themselves divided into numerically harmonious parts—32, 18, 8, 4, 2 measures—down to the single unit of l, and as a whole they also are a symbol of harmony, because all players contribute together to the sound. They do so without notation and conductor; the dominance of an individual is carefully avoided. The result is a harmonious relationship between individual and group and among the group itself. It is furthermore typical for Southeast—and East Asia, that silence is an integral part of music, not a blank, dead spot, but the complement necessary to sound, the two elements requiring each other.

2nd Musical Example: Bubaran Hujan Mas, Gamelan from the Pura Paku Alaman, Jogyakarta, Java. CD: Electra Nonesuch 9 72044—2

In the meantime each of you, I am sure has already thought of the metaphorical uses of the term ‘harmony’ and of the balance of forces. The use of these metaphors occurs in most cultures of the world and each of you will, based on your individual cultural background have many examples at hand.

Let me turn to the concept of harmony in the Western countries. The term “harmony” is Greek and originally referred to the joining together of different elements. It may have been used in carpentry and cabinet-making to indicate the crafting of a stable connection between different wooden parts, but its first appearance in literature is connected to music and means the order of pitches and the horizontal succession of tones (Greek music was primarily monophonic). In the sixth century BC the philosopher Pythagoras and his pupils discovered on the monochord that the proportions among the length of strings and therewith of intervals were ruled by mathematical proportions and, if simple, resulted in consonances such as unison, octave, or fifth. If the proportions were complicated, the result was dissonance, in other words, it sounded badly to their ears. Already at that time the idea of proportions governing music was extrapolated to astronomy. In Plato’s time musical proportions were associated with ethical concepts, i.e. certain scales had good effects, others bad ones. Thereby Plato arrived at the conclusion, that harmony which pleases the ear, results in ethical goodness. Since the theory of philosophers and musical practice are often wide apart, the struggle between a theory with its ethical implications and the the musical reality produced by musicians (who did not care too much about it) can truly be called epic; it lasted for two thousand years! The theoreticians for instance abhorred the so-called tritone and called it the devil in music. I found, however a love song from the late 14th century in which this interval is used exactly where the text speaks of love; this is not at all an example for irony but only evidence for the separate ways that practice and theory go and are still going.

But by that time, the term ‘harmony’ had already left the realm of musicology, the mathematical sciences, and the theory of architecture and was in use in innumerable other applications: In poetic literature, religion, politics etc., everywhere we find harmony with the meaning of being well matched, fitting, synchronized, in peace.

Obviously music is not always harmonious. After all, it has many other purposes and expresses an unlimited range of sentiments and ideas. Moreover, since music is non-verbal the field for misunderstandings is quite wide. We shall come back to this.

These observations lead us here to the preliminary conclusion, that aside from the simple etymological facts, harmony presents itself only in the abstract as the simple concept of a union of parts. In reality, however, it varies greatly throughout history and across the globe.

We can summarize the following points:

1. The Greeks and the European philosophers considered simple arithmetic proportions as harmonious. For others they may be simple, but not necessarily harmonious.

2. Conversely, as we learn from the Chinese example, harmony does not necessarily require the basis of mathematical proportions. In fact it transcends the mathematical. Nobody will object, if we call symbiosis in nature or the interaction of the two poles yin and yang harmonious; yet arithmetics have nothing to do with it.

3. Already in cabinet-making the term implies stability and goodness. This positive meaning transferred itself to the extended use of the word.

4. In many cases the idea of harmony also implies beauty. But we must be aware that beauty does not automatically imply harmony, certainly not, if we mean Pythagorean or Platonic harmony.

To this we must add an extra point: the idea of beauty is always culture-specific. If two cultures agree on the standard of beauty in a particular case, it is a coincidence or the result of acculturation.

We have now arrived at the central issue of this session about the transcendence of music and civilization and of the general theme of the Conference, 'Peace'. Can there be a universal agreement on what is musically harmonious and beautiful?

The answer is a definite NO. The Western middle-class listener of my generation who grew up with choir singing and music ranging from Bach to Beethoven and further to Brahms and Wagner, will consider the octave, the unison, the fifth and the triads as absolutely essential for establishing harmony and transmitting the feeling of harmony to the listener. Deviations such as minor seconds, major seventh, and above all microtones are considered as impure. Connoisseur or layman, both will smile condescendingly at those" impurities and at those who cause them; or they outright condemn them. "Impurities" are the nightmare of every choir conductor. However people who grew up with Korean, Indonesian, Chinese or Balkan music react the other way around. A pure unison of two singers can strike them as bland or boring and certainly not harmonious. Harmony, in their ears, is only reached, if, for example, two female voices carrying the same melody slightly deviate from each other—in seconds for examples—and circle around each other's tones, so that one perceives the two women singing together as joined individuals who are demonstrating their peaceful but colorful togetherness. Take another example: In Indonesia female singers have to use a sharp, nasal voice which grates on our Western ears and seems to them a source of friction with the other voices. For the indigenous audience the effect is completely different and immediately understood as serving the purpose of conveying beauty, as something unearthly, non-human, perhaps divine.

So we conclude that the concept of what is harmonious and beautiful in music traditionally varies from one culture to the next. The principle is culturally conditioned. A comparison with language informs us, that musical barriers are not necessarily as absolute as between the Indo-European, Turk-Mongolian and Chinese language group, but more marked than in the visual arts. Seen this way, music is not a universal language understood by everyone, but consists of many idioms, that are primarily understood by the group and the culture that created them.

How do we mediate this problem? Language knows three ways of mediation:

1. either we use translation,
2. or we use an intermediary language between the two partners, for example English,
3. or we learn the language of the other.

Translation in music is not possible, because it is a non-verbal medium. To use an intermediary language is the most common solution. But we all know about its shortcomings. Since it is not the mother tongue of either of the two partners, both have to translate, and this means that the common denominator will never completely cover the respective worlds of subtleties, allusions, hints, the irony, the imagery, and the tone. The more personal the information is which we want to convey, the less we like to use a language which is not our own. A Russian and a Chinese scientist will not have problems in exchanging arithmetical or sociological information in English, but will run into great difficulties, if they try to explore emotions or explain poetry to each other. Fortunately or unfortunately—depending on your viewpoint—music very much resists any translation or approximation. Even in vocal music—except for simple folk songs—translating the text does not satisfy. Most great opera houses today require the singers to sing in the original language because syntax, word length, word accent, inflexion, position of vowels, and speech melody always match the flexion of the music. Therefore underlying the music with a text in translation has ruinous effects on the musical content. I can only think of one musical equivalent of an intermediary musical language comparable to English as lingua franca: certain forms of pop music. They excite the disco visitors in Caracas, Lagos or Jakarta just as much as in Tokyo, Shanghai, Moscow, Birmingham, or New York. This kind of music can be an effective tool to unite the masses, but then its messages are usually extremely simple, if not trivial, and the level of mutual understanding is necessarily shallow.

To stay for a moment with this genre of music for mass media, I have observed in many places that the songwriters and musical arrangers or producers face a dilemma between being understandable to their own cultural

environment with its linguistic and musical codes, or being understandable to the masses on a global level. If they stick with their own idiom, they can preserve their identity but are not understood outside, if they cater to the international audience, they have to stay with those few musical and textual elements that are common property of the masses—at the risk to produce a music that is bland and without character. If this happens the creator looses his cultural identity; his own fans at home do not recognize him anymore as one of theirs. To serve both masters home and abroad and to reach an aesthetical agreement or balance between them is almost impossible.

This observation is even more pertinent to other types of music. The more embedded the music is in a specific civilization, culture, ethnic or social group, the more the people related to each other can identify with it, and the more it also risks not to be understandable to the others. The explanation is very simple: to reach harmony one has to understand the Other. Without mutual understanding, harmony cannot be achieved (except in Pythagorean mathematics), and without finding a common ground in the same verbal and musical language, harmony is not possible.

There remains the last possibility of communication, viz. that we learn the language of the other. Let me begin this last part of my contribution with a report on a personal experience. I grew up in an old city in Switzerland, where, like most of my classmates, I sang in a choir, had music lessons, played string quartet, went to concerts and used various other ways of participating in musical experiences. As an adult, I tentatively entered the world of music outside of European art music of the last centuries. At first, it was an expansion into earlier periods, later into other cultures. For many years, the "other" music was merely an exotic phenomenon; I wondered about different structures, different perceptions of time and process, dissonances, unfamiliar combinations of voices, unknown instruments producing strange sounds, but I could not relate to them psychologically, they were simply alien. Then I got to know Italy and learned Italian. Now I understood, how much the Italian musical idiom depends on Italian language and suddenly Italian madrigals and operas made new sense; they had become part of my musical horizon. Later I was lucky enough to be given a 5-year postdoctoral grant that brought me to Indonesia for 16 months. I learned Indonesian, lived with my family among Indonesians, and here again, I slowly discovered the parameters from which their music is made and got a feeling for the rituals and conditions under which the music was performed. It took a long time, until I gained an understanding of the meaning of the music both in Italy and Indonesia, and subsequently, under similar conditions, for the music in Greece, or for North American jazz, etc. I would not claim to completely understand their music with all of its codes, allusions, turns and other messages. I bet I still miss a good deal of what the musicians want to communicate. But there are moments, when I do perceive the message, where my sentiments as a listener are close to theirs. So I am somewhat puzzled by anyone who is quick to claim to understand a music which is not his or hers.

Of course there is also a professional bias, because one of the things musicologists learn in their very first class is, that music is a medium stubbornly resisting any verbalization. Musicology then is a profession that tries the impossible, to achieve a scientific description of something that is non-verbal, invisible and time-bound. Thus our skepticism towards any claim by a listener "my heart feels the music and understands its meaning" is almost automatic. As a university teacher I have found, that, at the beginning of their study of musicology, most students are even not able to hear a repeat, if the music is more complex than a folksong. How serious, then, can be their claim that they understand? In the United States, in my classes on Mozart's musical language, even exceptionally gifted students were unable to recognize blunt cynicism—which is characteristic of some of his works. Cynicism had no place in their system of morals and thus they could not understand the musical vocabulary used by Mozart to express it. The history of the reception of the so called classical music by European, even Austrian listeners between 1800 and 2000 demonstrates, that what people heard, varied widely and was often far from the mark and from the original intentions. People often heard what they wanted to hear, not was there. Of course this is even more so, if the music comes from another culture.

These experiences teach us, that there is no absolute understanding of art, and we should not look for it. But there is surely a more or less. Obviously the venerable conservatories in Shanghai and Beijing, at Kunitachi in Japan and in many other places in China, Korea, and Japan have trained such a wide segment of society in Western music, that there are millions of East Asians who are familiar with a good number of Western music pieces. Conversely the number of Europeans who know and appreciate East Asian music is ridiculously small. It is therefore not too risky a claim that many East Asians are able to meet the Europeans on their side, in seeking an understanding of how Beethoven or Schumann realized their in symphonies. But how many Europeans are capable of understanding how the Chinese express their ideas? Certainly no more than a few hundreds. This situation contrasts drastically with the

situation in literature. Most educated Europeans have Laotse's and Confucius' writings in a Western translation in their libraries and many generations of scholars, poets, teachers and laymen have been inspired by them. The concepts of balance of power, peace and harmony in Eastern and Western literature and teachings can be shared, although on both sides we may have no idea at all how those ideals have been realized during the last 2500 years in the practical world of every day.

In the realm of music the situation is far more complex and aesthetical misunderstandings are innumerable. Here the old prescription "Understanding requires knowing" is more important than anywhere else. A deeper understanding of the contents of music requires intense contacts with the musician and language command. And I can happily conclude my essay with the remark that this is not so bad. After all, learning to understand the Other, whether it is in music, language, or any other form of cultural and social expression, is always good, and the more we know of the other, the more substantial will agreement and harmony will become.

3rd Musical Example: Johann Sebastian Bach, Largo from 3rd Sonata for violin solo in C-Major, BWV 1005, played by Arthur Grumiaux. CD; Philips 464 673—2